

# The big question

BY JEROME TAYLOR  
jtaylor@independent.co.uk

## What's the extent of travellers' sites, and do they need tighter controls?

### Why are we asking this now?

Because the Government has released its latest detailed survey of just how many gypsies and travellers are living in Britain. As of January 2009 there were 17,865 caravans dotted across the country which belong predominantly to either Romani Gypsies or Irish Traveller communities. The highest concentration of caravan sites can be found across East Anglia, the south-west and the south, which account for more than half of all the sites within the UK.

### Is that a problem?

Overall, no. But in some areas tensions are palpable. The problem is that a small but significant proportion of gypsy sites in Britain are completely illegal. Travellers have either created their own camps without planning permission or are essentially squatting on someone else's land. For settled locals who live nearby there are often nasty clashes between the two communities. Local residents often complain of loud noise and increased crime, while the travellers argue that they are simply trying to put roots down but are stymied by centuries of anti-gypsy prejudice and planning laws that are biased against them.

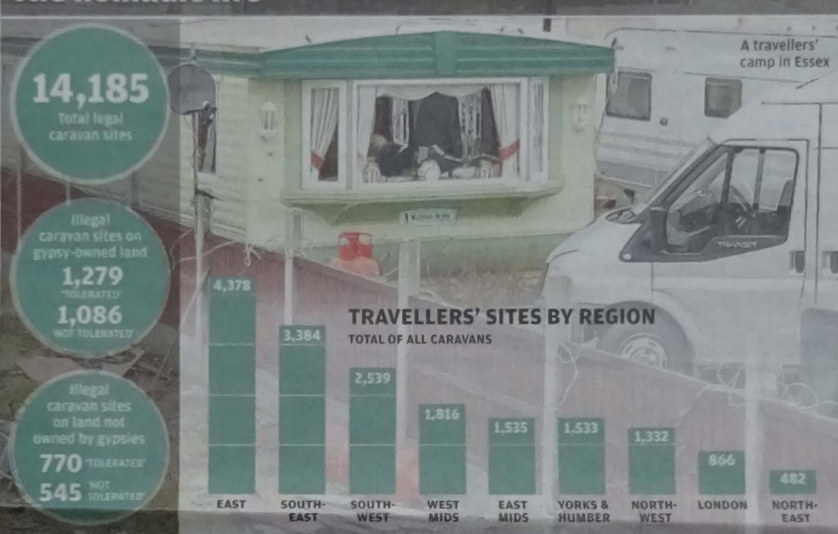
### Who exactly are Britain's gypsies?

Gypsies have been in Europe for more than 1,000 years and have had a sizeable presence in Britain since the early 1500s. The name itself is a bastardisation of "Egyptian" but Romani Gypsies (as opposed to Irish Travellers) actually trace their language and DNA back to what is now Rajasthan in north India. The most concerted Romani migration came with the Ottoman invasions which is partly why they have historically been so heavily stigmatised. The second core nomadic group within Britain are Irish Travellers who trace their lineage and culture to Ireland but have been living in Britain for centuries. Irish Travellers tend to speak their own language (usually Gamin or Cant) and have their own distinct cultural practices. Both Romani and Irish Travellers are recognised in Britain as distinct ethnic groups.

### How many are there?

No one really knows the true number. Despite being distinct ethnic groups no census has ever bothered with a traveller category. The former Commission for Racial Equality estimates that Britain's gypsy community is somewhere between 180,000 to 350,000. Despite popular perceptions of leading a nomadic lifestyle,

### The nomadic life



the vast majority of gypsies (an estimated 300,000) live in bricks and mortar housing.

### So how many illegal sites are there?

If you read certain sections of the press you'd probably believe that the entire country is swamped by dirty, festering gypsy encampments that blight the local populace. The reality is in fact very different. Of all the caravans in the UK owned by gypsies or travellers, the vast majority (14,185) are entirely legal developments that are either on land owned by the gypsies themselves or are rented privately off landlords. There are currently only 3,680 caravans camped illegally, but 2,049 of those are what the government terms "tolerated", which means there is little dissent shown towards the encampments from the local communities. That leaves just 1,631 caravans situated in places where major problems are being caused by their presence.

### Why doesn't the government re-house people?

Because handing land over to gypsies who prefer a life on the road or in caravans rather than in free council housing is not exactly a vote-winner. The government would quickly be accused of giving travellers a free ride if they gave them land so the

general approach has been to try and encourage them to buy their own. By the government's own admission from a 2006 report, the amount of land required for 4,000 pitches is little more than one square mile. But despite this, illegal encampments remain a major issue.

### How did this problem come about?

Prior to 1994 local authorities were required to find areas of land where travellers could temporarily stay but the Tories simply got rid of that provision in the hope that the "traveller

problem" would disappear. But it didn't. Travellers and gypsies were expected to provide for themselves and integrate into the settled community but many lacked the means or know how to do so (literacy rates and life expectancy among gypsies remain way below the national average). Those who did try to buy their own land found themselves constantly coming up against planning laws that routinely discriminated against them. Research conducted in 1997 found that whereas 80 per cent of all planning applications from the settled community were accepted, 90 per cent of gypsy and traveller applications were initially rejected. Even

today only 54 per cent of applications are approved and most of those are only on appeal.

### How did the illegal encampments spring up?

Tired of trying but failing to do things legitimately, a small number of gypsies simply began buying up cheap green-belt land and building on it regardless of planning permission. For the gypsies themselves it is a tried-and-tested formula which makes it difficult and costly to evict them. Members of the community tend to buy the land anonymously at auction and then wait for a bank holiday. While the local planning officer takes some time off, the bulldozers move in and by the time the planning office opens an encampment (often with running water and electricity already installed) has sprung up. The gypsies then apply for retroactive planning permission which is rarely granted but tends to drag on allowing them to stay for a decent spell.

### Why can't local councils just move gypsies on?

From time to time they are evicted but eviction itself doesn't solve the problem. If you move a gypsy encampment on they'll just move to another illegal site. One of the biggest illegal sites in Essex, which has some of the highest concentration of Irish Traveller communities in the country, is Dale Farm near Basildon. About two-thirds of the estimated 1,000 gypsies are living there illegally and most of them arrived in 2001 when nearby sites were being cleared out. For years Dale Farm was the centre of a landmark legal battle between Basildon Council and the gypsies, who eventually lost their final appeal earlier this year. The bulldozers could come any minute and those councils that are suffering similar illegal encampment problems will now feel emboldened to remove their own gypsies. But until the illegal travellers are given somewhere permanent the cycle will continue.

### What should happen now?

If the government can persuade local authorities to provide gypsies with permanent land the majority of the few remaining illegal travellers will almost certainly settle down. Most now recognise that they will have to integrate with the settled community, as long as they keep their traditions and distinct culture. But until the illegal sites are dealt with, prejudice against Britain's travellers will continue to keep them on our fringes.

### Is Britain's gypsy problem exaggerated?

#### Yes...

- Historical prejudice means Britain's gypsies rarely receive a fair hearing, and coverage in sections of the press doesn't help
- The vast majority of gypsies actually live in permanent accommodation and not caravans
- Illegal encampments are in reality few and far between

#### No...

- There are still thousands of travellers living illegally on land that isn't theirs or for which they don't have planning permission
- It's not exaggerated if you live next door to an illegal encampment
- The government and local authorities seem unwilling or unable to tackle the problem